

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Writing Curricular Calendar, Sixth Grade, 2012-2013
Unit Three - Informational Writing: Nonfiction Books

1

Unit Three – Informational Writing: Nonfiction Books

November/December

Introduction to the Unit: The Impetus for Changes and Qualities of Good Information Writing

The Common Core State Standards helped us at Reading and Writing Project to rethink information writing as more than note-taking, but as a type of writing that merits attention to its craft and structure. This last year, therefore, the RWP invited lead teachers to pilot a unit of study in information writing - and we focused on creating nonfiction books. The results were pretty fabulous. The minute we moved from articles to books, kids went from writing three pages to writing twenty, incorporating charts, diagrams, and text features. Also, kids became much better readers of information texts. The same students who had been skipping the charts and diagrams in the nonfiction they were reading, began to study these as mentor texts. They can also bring this work to their content classes, where they can wrap up research by writing nonfiction books on special topics. We think this unit is pretty important for sixth graders especially, and we encourage you to fit it into your writing curriculum if possible.

Even if the decision is somewhat arbitrary, it is important to decide whether to include, within the tent called information writing, narrative nonfiction such as biography. Because there is a thin line between biography and autobiography, between autobiography and personal narrative, the RWP has decided to exclude all of this, settling on a definition of information writing that is expository, not narrative, in design. This doesn't mean an information text won't contain stories—it will—but there will be an infrastructure (an outline, almost) into which a story is set and the entire text will not be a single story. There is also the question of whether persuasive letters, speeches, reviews and petitions will be regarded as information writing, and whether literary and historical essays will qualify as information writing. Because the Common Core State Standards name three 'kinds' of writing and do so by separating argument/opinion writing and information writing (with narrative being the third), we decided that thesis-driven texts that advance a claim will not be information writing. Of course, an information text can contain a section that has an essay-like structure, but the text itself will not all advance a single overarching thesis. We also acknowledge that at the highest levels, some information will resemble argument writing. But, then, some information writing will resemble poetry as well!

What Standards This Unit Addresses

This unit particularly addresses Common Core writing standard 6.2, and its sub-standards. These standards ask students to create an organizational structure, to introduce their topic, and to develop their topic with ideas and information, as well as a thoughtful use of text features and formatting. You'll also support students' growth in Writing Standard 6.9, as they synthesize and incorporate evidence gathered in research. If you have students who are advanced writers, thinkers, and researchers, you may draw on more of the argument standards, from standard 6.1, asking students to angle their books to support an overarching idea.

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Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Writing Curricular Calendar, Sixth Grade, 2012-2013
Unit Three - Informational Writing: Nonfiction Books

2

Use Performance Assessments to Steer Your Teaching

You will want to begin the unit by setting aside one day for an on-demand information writing assessment. The RWP's Common Core aligned Information Writing Assessment Tool will be available to you through our website. You could say to your students, "Tomorrow I'm going to give you time to show me what you already know about writing to teach someone about a topic. Bring in any resources that you would want to quote from to help you write about topic you are expert on. Then the following day, you could give them this prompt: "Think of topic that you are expert on. Write an information text that teaches your audience the important parts of this topic, using everything you know about information writing, including text features, organization, and so on." When you tell your students about the task, don't set them up for it by quickly reviewing all the characteristics of information writing or by otherwise trying to scaffold them to be successful with information writing. This is the pre-test and your hope will be that your students see themselves making giant strides during the interval between this preliminary assessment and the end-of-the-unit culminating assessment. Of course, after your students do a quick on-demand information writing, you will want to study what they have done so as to adjust your plans for this unit accordingly.

Qualities of Information Writing

Before proceeding to read the unit, a teacher may find it interesting to study a still-incomplete description of qualities of good information writing. Remember as you read this that the RWP community of practice acknowledges that the world of information writing is a big and varied one, and that these qualities are actually not essential for all information writing. But we're suggesting that the community crystallize an understanding of information writing so as to provide teachers and students with a clear goal and with unambiguous help reaching that goal. Hattie, Petty and others have synthesized 500,000+ research studies that illuminate the factors that support increased student achievement (which is not the only important goal but certainly is important) and produced a finding that seems rather obvious, once one reads it, and that illuminates our work on informational writing. Their research shows that students progress more quickly when they are given a crystal clear, ambitious but reachable goal, one they can fix their eyes upon and work towards for a while—presumably, for weeks, not minutes.

Once writers are generally able to produce the information writing as described here, then of course a teacher will want to teach students that actually the world of information writing is more varied, the possibilities more infinite.

Structure

The writer has chosen an over-arching topic and introduces a claim about that topic. To decide on a topic, it is as if the writer chooses how large the 'big tent' of it will be. For example, will this writing focus on ancient civilizations in general, on a single ancient civilization? (and will that more focused text address a topic as general as 'Egyptian social structure' or will it zoom in to a topic as focused as 'The Kingdoms')? Then again, will the writer focus on one aspect of ancient civilizations (their rise and fall, influences on modern civilization). Questions about

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Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Writing Curricular Calendar, Sixth Grade, 2012-2013
Unit Three - Informational Writing: Nonfiction Books

3

specificity remain. Will an information text focusing on their rise and fall address this topic by referring to the rise and fall of many different ancient civilizations, or a specific one, or to the most successful ancient civilizations, or what?

Informational writing includes generalizations or abstraction or big ideas, and supporting information. That is, informational writing includes big ideas such as 'Insects have developed remarkable capacities to survive and thrive.' In well-written informational writing, the supporting information—the facts, data, statistics, quotes, definitions, examples, paraphrasing, descriptions, etc.—is grouped so that under the 'big tent' of a generalization or sub-topic or big idea, there will be a cluster of related support-information.

In order to make a decision about the focus of a text, an author thinks about various different ways in which he or she could possibly divide his or her topic into parts, and then the author probably does alternate versions of a map or outline or sketch of the text in order to and resort the support information, thinking, 'If I divide the topic *this* way, will I have the information I need to support each of the sub-topics or generalizations?' 'If I divide the topic *that* way, will I have the information I need?' The writer simultaneously needs to think, 'What are the interesting aspects and main ideas that I want to teach readers?' The text's organization should match the content and respond to the audience so that the plan for the text will advance the important ideas or showcase the interesting aspects of a topic, while also presenting information in the order in which the reader will want to get that information.

That is, the writer usually comes up with several plans or outlines for how the text could go, thinking through the pluses and minuses of each plan. Sometimes the whole text has different major parts, almost as if the whole text is comprised of two or three big-tents, each arching over several smaller and related parts. But the big tents—the categories—are not written in stone, they are chosen. A pile of laundry can be sorted by yours and mine, or by color, or by shirts and trousers, or by needs ironing and doesn't need ironing. In the same way, the information about a topic—photosynthesis—can be sorted in various ways. What is not ideal is for the pile of laundry to be sorted into piles such as this: blue clothes, yours, my favorites, mine. A collection of categories such as that wouldn't follow what the Common Core State Standards describe as "a logical system." We want to teach RWP students to avoid that misstep.

In thinking about how the whole text will be laid out, the author often thinks of the text as a course on the chosen topic, and thinks of the layout of the text as something like a syllabus for a course. 'What will readers need to learn (and be ready to learn) first, next, and finally?' The author who plans the 'course' that the text will teach in such a way may decide to tell readers his or her overall plan early on (or not) and may decide to use sub-headings to delineate parts of this plan (or not). Sometimes the author will decide to appeal to a reader's interest early on by mentioning little bits about topics that will be covered later, returning to develop those little bits in due time. Such a writer assumes that if the text addresses a topic in more than one place, we, the reader, can reach back to earlier information, integrating the new information in with that

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Writing Curricular Calendar, Sixth Grade, 2012-2013
Unit Three - Informational Writing: Nonfiction Books

4

which has been stated earlier.

In order to outline the text, the author will probably consider the structure that seems to 'match' the information. To do this, the author will probably benefit from thinking about traditional 'kinds of' text structures. Is this information most easily organized into a chronological structure (as one would use if the piece tracks one life time or one journey). Another way to organize a text is to address the problems, then the solutions, or the actions or causes, then the consequences or results. Then again, the author may organize the text in a descriptive way, surveying a taxonomy of parts, often attending first to the most dominant or obvious aspects of a part, then the aspects one sees upon looking more closely. Texts can also be organized into a compare-and-contrast structure, where the writer discusses how several parts or sub-topics are mostly the same (but partly different) or are mostly different (but partly the same).

Elaboration

Informational writing is built with information—with specifics. It is important for a writer to draw on a wealth of concrete details. This will include answers to questions, text evidence, statistics, definitions, facts, terms, descriptions, observations, patterns, sequences, true anecdotes etc.

The writer supports generalizations, claims, and central ideas with text evidence, doing this in a way that brings the generalizations to life and that establishes the writer's authority and convinces readers that the central ideas and generalizations are warranted and trustworthy. For this to work, there needs to be an alignment between the claims and the evidence. This means the claims can't be over-stated and the evidence must match and substantiate the claims.

Even when providing substantiating information, writing underneath the 'big tent' of a central idea, the writer seems to continue to cluster several little facts under umbrellas of generalizations or larger ideas. Instead of simply lurching from one big of evidence to another bit, the writer seems to have tried to cluster these bits. That is, if the big idea is that elephants' whole lives are a struggle to survive, instead of then talking about how the elephant's trunk helps it survive, the author may add a mid-size 'big idea,' (an umbrella idea, not a big tent idea,) saying, for example, that every part of the elephant's body is designed to help the elephant survive.

The writer researches relevant information that not only matches the big ideas or the claims, but that also is apt to interest readers. One way to make information interesting is to vary it, so a writer is apt to include diverse bits of information. Just as a narrative writer might set a bit of dialogue alongside a description of an action and then add in a bit about the setting, the information writer is apt to juxtapose a more developed anecdote with two or three pieces of evidence from the text and then frame this with a quote. The writer always writes with an excess of specific information, and needs to select from this warehouse in order to fashion the text he or she wants to make. The writer selects information that 'goes together' and also makes selections based on what it is he or she is trying to say, to convey. For example, the writer seems to use

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Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Writing Curricular Calendar, Sixth Grade, 2012-2013
Unit Three - Informational Writing: Nonfiction Books

5

more specifics to develop the a sub-topic that he or she believes is especially important to readers' understandings.

It is not just selection of specifics that makes an impression on readers. The writer also writes in such a way that the information 'reaches' the reader, making an impression. One important way of doing this is the writer often helps readers envision information that may be hard to grasp – commonly this is statistical information, but it could be any information from an array of texts. To help readers envision the information, the writer is apt to make a comparison, often by relying on simile. A female whale is 50 feet long—the size of a school bus. A baby whale is three feet tall—the size of a sofa.

The writer also helps a reader respond to the information presented by responding to that information alongside the reader. After citing or paraphrasing some specific information, a writer often 'unpacks that information.' This is not apt to involve the writer sharing his or her feelings about the information (although more novice writers may respond to information with quips such as 'and that's a lot!' or 'I'd *hate* that if it was me!' or 'Gross!') More experienced information writers, on the other hand, respond to information with analytical thinking. The writer might relate new information to known information, might raise a question and speculate the answer, might reflect on surprising aspects of the information, might divide the information into parts, or might evaluate the information.

The writer finds ways to tuck subordinate but helpful bits of information into the text without derailing the reader from attending to the central idea or over-arching generalizations. The subordinate information that is incorporated into the text often reveals background information or provides definitions of domain specific words. This information is often included through appositives or text boxes, but it may be incorporated into subordinate phrases and sentences.

The author seems to keep in mind a concern for providing readers what it is they need to know in order to comprehend whatever the writer wants to say next. That is, the writer attempts to answer readers' questions in the order in which they are asked. As part of this, the writer needs to keep an eye always on pace, and on reader-engagement. Has the text just dumped a whole boat load of facts onto the reader in a way that is sure to overwhelm? Might the reader wonder why this whole chunk of text is included, and feel like he or she is being led down a detour. The writer keeps the reader always in mind, and may well address the reader directly, writing to you. For example, the writer might write, "It is important for you to understand that there are other uses for the water hole as well as this one" before proceeding into a section addressing that topic.

Getting Ready: Assessing Your Writers, Immersing them in the Genre, and Supporting them in Topic Choice

Teachers, it is important to note the kind of work the RWP recommends you do before the unit even begins, as you wrap up your previous writing unit. First, you will conduct an initial on-

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Writing Curricular Calendar, Sixth Grade, 2012-2013
Unit Three - Informational Writing: Nonfiction Books

6

demand writing assessment to get a sense of what your students already know about information writing, what they know about the topic they have chosen, and what are some areas you need to prioritize in your teaching. Next, you will help students get a sense of the genre with some mentor text work. Finally, you will encourage students to begin thinking about topics they know they can teach people about - because they know these topics so well. Most students will choose a topic they are already expert in. You might encourage students to write about a topic they have learned about in social studies or science if (and only if) they have already gained sufficient knowledge about that topic, particularly if students have already been doing close reading on such a topic in their content area classes. For those of you who have been RWP workshop teachers for a while, this is a departure from the way our units typically go, with students spending a couple of days brainstorming topics before settling on one to focus in on. There are several reasons why we are espousing this particular approach in this unit.

It is common for a writer/ researcher to want to spend a very long time "choosing a topic" for the entire project of writing an information book. Thus, most of the work of "choosing a topic" needs to happen before that month begins. This is entirely possible because the work involved in settling on a subject for one's writing is as much research and lifework as it is desk work. The writer walks through his or her day, thinking, 'What do I know about this topic that I might teach to others?' The writer considers what he or she has learned in science about the human body and asks, "Could I write about this? What specifically about the human body am I becoming an expert on?" Or, the writer checks in on the progress of a favorite sports team and thinks, 'Might I write about this team?'

We at the RWP have found that one reason to do much of this work before the unit on information writing even begins is that this, then, can allow the writer to settle upon a terrain in time to spend some time collecting 'stuff' related to the chosen topic. You can rely on your colleagues in social studies and science classes as well to facilitate students' developing ideas and knowledge about a chosen topic, thereby emphasizing a key tenet in this unit good informational writing is truly about a writer's ability to gain a deep understanding about a topic, relevant facts, and domain-specific vocabulary from an array of informational texts. That is, if the writer decides to write about snakes, the writer lives like a magnet on that topic, collecting information, materials, stories, ideas. This enables the writer to be more ready, during the first two or maybe three days of the information writing unit, to do the very challenging and critical work of deciding upon a more specific focus/angle and upon at least an initial plan for the way in which the writing will be structured. This work—deciding upon a focus and a structure—is extremely important work, and absolutely requires desk work and conferring.

Another reason to do as much of the idea generating before the unit launches is because the RWP has found that this unit works best when students are writing about topics they know fully, which is much easier to do when a writer doesn't have much time to over-think the topic and just goes with something they can teach on the spot. So much of this unit is focused on the challenging work of structure and elaboration, that when students spend too much class time generating

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Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Writing Curricular Calendar, Sixth Grade, 2012-2013
Unit Three - Informational Writing: Nonfiction Books

7

possible ideas, they can get distracted by a topic that sounds intriguing, and they think they know something about, but is in fact something they only have a shallow understanding of. When this happens, students find themselves spending more time wrestling with the actual content than the writing. This is why some students will be ready to access a topic they are learning about in their content areas, but some students may just be ready to write about a topic of which they are personally an expert. For all students, there will be time in this year's curriculum for students to balance learning new content and practicing informational structures, we suggest that for many students, starting by getting a handle on the genre first, will allow them to focus their energies on learning the writing work.

The suggested teaching, below, describes in greater detail this pre-unit work.

We at the RWP realize that this unit may contain more instruction than you are able to fit into your calendar. We strongly suggest that you keep the pre-unit work and bend one pure, and that you remove lessons from the revision bend if time is tight. Of course, you'll need to study your writers' work as they draft to decide which revision lessons to keep and which to leave off, and any of the revision sessions can be tucked into another session as mid-workshop interruptions or shares.

Pre-Unit Day One: Assessing Informational Writing

Teachers, before you begin this unit, we recommend that you spend one class period conducting an on-demand informational writing assessment before launching this unit. Ideally, you will use the same prompt and same conditions as other Reading and Writing Project teachers have used so that you will be in a position to analyze the writing your students produce under the same conditions, referring to the *Continuum for Assessing Informational Writing* (www.readingandwritingproject.com) as well as the qualities of good information writing enumerated above. On the day before the assessment, say to your students, "Think of a topic that you've studied or know. Tomorrow, you will have an hour to write an informational text that teaches others interesting and important information and ideas about that topic. If you want to find and use information from a book or another outside source, you may bring that with you tomorrow. Please keep in mind that you'll have an hour to complete this." Then, the following day, provide them with sixty minutes, or one writing workshop, to show what they know about informational writing.

This on-demand writing will help you know where your students fall in a trajectory of writing development and help you set your sights on very clear next steps. It will also help students realize that informational writing is well within their grasp, and not something that requires days and weeks of preparation. Most RWP classrooms of students who have done the on-demand assessment have been pleasantly surprised by how much students bring into this unit of study, and by the volume of writing students are able to produce in just one day's writing workshop. The work that students produce in the on-demand situation becomes the baseline, and you can increase expectations as the unit progresses.

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Writing Curricular Calendar, Sixth Grade, 2012-2013
Unit Three - Informational Writing: Nonfiction Books

8

Pre-Unit Day Two: Studying a Mentor Text During Read Aloud to Help Writers to Bring Forward Their Understanding of the Genre

Most teachers find that mentor texts can be powerful co-teachers in any writing unit. This is especially true in informational writing when clear examples of structure, elaboration and other hallmarks of the genre will be key.

When choosing mentor texts for this unit, you will want to choose texts that highlight the things you plan to teach, are accessible to your students and are examples of quality writing. While there is no magic text that will be able to encompass everything you (or we) might want to teach, the RWP staff have found that many of the books in the *DK Reader* series are great, including *Shark Attack!* We are also especially fond of the *National Geographic Kids* series. One standout title in this series is *Deadliest Animals*, a text we will be referring to throughout this write-up. These are texts at lower levels, which lets kids see the structure and craft easily and very, very quickly. You might also include more sophisticated texts, such as *Brooklyn Bridge* by Elizabeth Mann, or *Rats* by Robert Sullivan.

No matter what text (or texts) you ultimately decide upon, most RWP teachers have found it helpful to introduce the text first to the students a few days before the unit begins in a read aloud, and to allow the students to respond to the text first as readers. Allow them to talk over fascinating facts with their partners, argue points that seem worth arguing, and in general respond as readers to the text. This is important because students will want to hold on to the effect a strongly written text can have on readers and we also want students to feel so familiar with the text they can focus on the writing, not the content.

A day (or several) after students have explored the text as readers, you will want to return to the text and guide the students in exploring it as writers. You might say something like, "As you all know, we are going to start creating our own informational books next week - books that teach. I thought it would be helpful for us to spend some time formulating ideas about what makes up a strong informational book."

Then, depending on how experienced you and your students are with mentor texts and/or informational writing, you might choose to formulate ideas about the text as a whole class, or else to have the students break up into small groups and formulate ideas that way. No matter which way works best for you and your students, the pointed study of a text *as a writer*, how the text is constructed, the choices the author made, will prove to be an invaluable experience that you and your students will refer to again and again throughout this unit.

We expect that your students will investigate a great many things, with your guidance, about the informational text you've chosen to study. You will likely find that it feels especially important to analyze the author's choice about any of the main qualities of writing we will be working on

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Writing Curricular Calendar, Sixth Grade, 2012-2013
Unit Three - Informational Writing: Nonfiction Books

9

in this unit such as: logical structure across and within the text, strategies for elaborating on important information using text evidence, authorial voice and domain language.

If you were to use *Deadliest Animals*, for example, you might voice over as the students are exploring the text by saying, "Let's investigate what choices you think the author made to organize this text. Let's focus first on how that table of contents is structured. It seems like, in each chapter, the animals being covered are deadlier than the one before it. It's almost as if the chapters are building upon each other. Any ideas about why you think the author chose to do so?" Or, "Is anyone else generating some ideas about why the author decided to refer to the chapter right before at the start of each new chapter? Like, in the chapter on polar bears, it refers to the lions in the previous chapter: 'Like a lion, a polar bear is a skilled hunter...'"

Pre-Unit Day Three (and possibly Four): Generating Ideas for Expert Topics in Order to Prepare for Informational Writing

In the week or so before the unit begins, channel your writers to live like authors of information texts, carefully studying the details of they are learning in their content areas or in their lives for possible topics. You can distribute small notebooks, telling students to keep them in their pockets and to use them not only to keep lists of possible topics but also to try on those topics with some rehearsal. Teach kids a few different generating strategies, such as naming topics on which they feel expert, topics they could teach to others, and topics they really care about. You could also add strategies from previous RWP units, angling students toward generating ideas for information writing. For example, you could teach your writers to think about information books they wish existed in the world.

You might decide you can hold mini share sessions in which you give your writers the opportunity to teach about the topics they are mulling over with others. You might even set your writers up to brainstorm topics in partnerships. "What am I expert on that I could teach others?" one might ask another, perhaps prompting a partner to offer a reminder such as, "You know more about how machines work than anyone else I know!" Or, if they are working beyond a content area topic, they might reflect on the types of questions they get asked all the time by other people. "My mom always asks me for ways to entertain my little brother and sister. I definitely could teach other parents about ways to entertain little kids."

Some teachers might find that another way to both scaffold students' understanding of the genre and to open up other possible topics to write about is to do a little shared writing. If you are familiar with shared writing and feel like this would be a good support for your students, you might consider doing some quick (one session) shared writing that could turn out to be a class book on something that class is an expert on (gym class, geography, taking field trips, plate tectonics, etc.). In the generating of these class ideas and the execution of the class book, students will quickly gather many additional possible topics that are open to them, as well as glean a general understanding before the unit even begins of how informational books can go. If you choose to go with a full shared writing session at the beginning of the unit, you might want

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Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Writing Curricular Calendar, Sixth Grade, 2012-2013
Unit Three - Informational Writing: Nonfiction Books

10

to change the active engagements that suggest students try creating a class book. If you opt out of shared writing, you can rest assured that your students can get a version of the shared writing through your active engagements.

Bend One – Information Writers Learn How To Teach While Exploring Structure and Purpose

Finally, day one of the unit! Prior to the unit's launch, you have assessed your writers, introduced them to an anchor mentor text and given them a bit of time to generate a topic of expertise about which they feel drawn to write, and you may have done some shared writing to co-construct a class informational book. Now, you will begin the unit with each writer having a topic in mind and a sense of the genre. To launch day one of the unit with a drumroll you might decide to set your writers up to teach others about topics of expertise. Yet, not only will your writers teach about their topic, they will study their teaching moves to help inform moves they might make as informational writers. You might say, "Writers, today what I want to teach you is this: good information writing is like good teaching. When we get ready to write information, we can teach others about our topics, and then we can study our own teaching to get ideas for moves we can make as writers." You can model for writers how you might plan across your fingers on your topic of expertise, demonstrating how you come up with five really important things that an audience would need to know about that topic. So if you were using the topic of pests which many teachers across the city modeled with last year you might list key concepts such as:

- Rats and mice are attracted to garbage and other unsanitary conditions, a typical problem in many New York City neighborhoods.
- Every year, New Yorkers are bitten by rats and suffer from "rat-bite fever."
- Bed bugs have become one of the most significant pests in New York City, and they are very difficult and expensive to eliminate.
- Helping people eliminate pests from in and around their homes is a really big business in the city.
- Cockroaches are difficult to get rid of, because they move from one apartment to another through tiny cracks and water pipes.

As you list what you want your audience to know about your topic, the RWP suggests you also highlight some key teaching moves you want to make such as making sure to use really clear details, adding in stories, explaining important terms, including pictures or diagrams. You might even want to start a chart such as one titled: *Teaching Moves that Can Power Informational Writing*, as one of the key goals of this work is helping students transfer the teaching moves they make to their writing. After setting students up to teach, perhaps in groups, you might gather the class for a share to analyze and evaluate which teaching moves worked best and adding to (or revising your chart).

For homework, you can suggest that your writers think about ways to revise their teaching and the next day in class you can have them teach revised lessons. This day will emphasize to your writers that revision matters and that work can be more powerful if we transfer and apply our newest learning. Then too, you will have given your writers the chance to rehearse possible ways

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Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Writing Curricular Calendar, Sixth Grade, 2012-2013
Unit Three - Informational Writing: Nonfiction Books

11

their informational books might go. Their writing will be more powerful and focused from the get-go the more chances they get to revise their plans in light of making their work more clear, more engaging, and more powerful to an audience. To that end, we suggest that you delay launching your writers directly into drafting but spend still a bit more time in the rehearsal part of the process. To do so, you have a few options. You might first choose to have your writers write long about their topics, putting their teaching sessions on paper and looking to see what material they have as they do so that they can start to sort it out. You might show them how you write everything that comes to your mind about your own topic (you might use one such as the now-famous topic many teachers used to model this work last year: cockroaches), writing an entry that might look like this one :

I know that cockroaches are not just a problem in New York City but all over the world. There are two main species of cockroaches: the American cockroach and the German cockroach. It's important to know which species you are dealing with, because each species requires different approaches to controlling them. Cockroaches are omnivores which means they will eat pretty much anything, even the glue in bookbindings. That's why people often find cockroaches in their bookshelves! It is really hard to get rid of cockroaches in apartment buildings, because the roaches will just relocate from one apartment to another. Many people are allergic to roach saliva, and they might not realize that cockroaches are causing a lot of their health problems.

You might then model seeing various, more focused sub-topics which could be the focus of chapters of your book such as “causes and effects of different strategies people use to eliminate each species of cockroach” or “comparing and contrasting ways that cockroaches and other city pests, like rats, can be dangerous to our health” or “how cockroaches evolved into such a problem.” You might set your writers up to do this work, supporting them with thought prompts, if necessary:

- Another thing I know is...
- Another important idea is...
- For example,...
- Readers need to know this because...

You might then follow with (or teach instead) another different, more-scaffolded option for helping your writers develop and narrow their topics and plan before drafting, keeping your writers at the meeting area for a little longer than usual as you explore different possibilities of organizational structures as a class. You will want to channel your writers to try out different ways of planning their books and then revising those plans right away.

So, you might teach your writers to think about different ways that topics can be divided, such as parts, kinds, times, or famous examples. We at the RWP have found that you'll want to make sure you have your own topic of personal expertise at the ready in order to demonstrate how this might go. For example, you could use a topic like cockroaches and show how this topic could be

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Writing Curricular Calendar, Sixth Grade, 2012-2013
Unit Three - Informational Writing: Nonfiction Books**

12

divided into parts like: getting rid of cockroaches, types of cockroaches, how cockroaches survive day to day, how cockroaches and humans interact. What is important is that kids are trying out different ways their topic could be divided, even if some ways lack finesse. When supporting your writers as they write independently, we suggest you draw on your collection of mentor texts. For example, you might use several books to guide a small group through an inquiry on other ways informational books could be organized. During a share, you might highlight examples of students who have done work you would like the others to try. So you might reconvene your class and show them the work of a student writing about Ancient Mesopotamia who has thought of several ways to divide her topic:

Aspects of Daily Life in Ancient Mesopotamia

- School
- Art & Music
- Religion
- Economy

People Important to Ancient Mesopotamia

- The Assyrians
- The Sumerians
- The Babylonians

Art in Mesopotamia

- Music
- Poetry
- Jewelery

Of course, you won't want your writers to spend days and days planning. You'll want to make sure they are writing with volume and stamina right from the start. The RWP has found that using some organizational structures often used in informational writing as a way to explore topics can help writers to both push their thinking and also to gather information on their topics. The Common Core expects your sixth graders to "organize ideas, concepts, and information, using strategies such as definition, classification, comparison/contrast, and cause/effect" and thus, during this session, you might help your writers to try out some of these logical organizational systems (W 6.2).

So on another day, you might help writers try out different structures of organization, first modeling with your own writing and then giving your students a chance to try out this structure using their own topic. You can convene your class in the meeting area, and let them know that the teaching you will do will take longer than a typical minilesson. Then, demonstrate how you would use various structures to explore your thinking about your topic, and channel them to give it a try. Note that it is perfectly acceptable for kids to only explore part of their topic using these structures. You might start with boxes and bullets, for example. With a topic such as

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Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Writing Curricular Calendar, Sixth Grade, 2012-2013
Unit Three - Informational Writing: Nonfiction Books

13

cockroaches, you could model how you begin with a box (a broad category), and list some bullets (details) underneath:

Getting Rid of Cockroaches

- Traps
- Poison
- Green-friendly methods
- Prevention

Then have your writers try this structure with their own topics. Next, you might demonstrate how you use another organizational structure to push your thinking, such as cause/effect:

Causes	Effects
Trapping Cockroaches	Can successfully get rid of a few cockroaches temporarily, but won't get rid of all the cockroaches and definitely won't get rid of the eggs
Poisoning Cockroaches	Will kill most of the cockroaches, but is dangerous if you have pets or small children and some cockroaches build up a resistance to poisons over time that they pass on to their offspring

Again, channel your writers to try the cause/effect structure, and then demonstrate another structure, such as pro/con:

Pros of killing cockroaches:

- *You get rid of them!*
- *They won't eat your food.*
- *You won't be embarrassed when people come to your house*

Cons of killing cockroaches:

- *Cockroaches are living creatures*
- *Cockroaches are part of the food chain*
- *Cockroaches take care of crumbs and other leftover food and garbage that would go to waste otherwise*

Once your writers have given pro/con a try, you can demonstrate one final structure, such as compare/contrast. This exercise often has more payoff if writers compare and contrast their topics with a different topic, one that might have some similarities and would give them some new insights into their topics. For example, we decided to compare "cockroaches" with a similar creature, one that some might consider to be a household pest as well.

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Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Writing Curricular Calendar, Sixth Grade, 2012-2013
Unit Three - Informational Writing: Nonfiction Books

14

Getting Rid of Cockroaches and Mice

Similarities:

Cockroaches and mice are similar because they both live in people's homes, even though people don't really want them there and so they try to get rid of them. Both creatures are killed by similar methods: traps, poison...

Differences:

Cockroaches and mice are different because not everyone wants to kill mice. In fact, there are humane traps that allow humans to catch mice without killing them so that the mice can be set free in a field or someplace else. No one really wants a humane trap for a cockroach. Also, there are people who do not want to get rid of mice, or at least don't care about getting rid of mice because they think mice are cute. However, hardly anyone thinks cockroaches are cute and almost everyone wants to get rid of them.

The RWP has found you can keep pushing your writers to create focused plans by reminding them to keep looking at the logical order of their plans. The Common Core highlights the importance of sixth graders' "selection, organization, and analysis of relevant content" and thus, you will want your writers to work to continually consider what material to include and how best to organize it. You might model revising your own chapters of your book, charging your writers with going back to revise the maps they have drafted for their own work. You might show writers, in a mid-workshop, share or small group how two chapters might be combined into one or how one broad chapter might need to be broken apart.

You might involve writers in studying the way mentor authors organize their work and then trying out what they notice to revise the planning of their own books. You might highlight what students have noticed, showing the rest of the class how particular students have used mentor texts to revise their own writing. So you might show them the inquiry that one student has done into Melissa Stewart's *Deadliest Animals*. You might put the table of contents on chart paper or SMART board, and say, "So, we know from reading the book that "Deadly Surprises" is all about lions. But, instead of just calling the chapter "Lions" Melissa Stewart made it sound even more dangerous. Lauren decided to go back and change her chapter titles to make each of her sports sound more exciting. Another thing she noticed is that the chapters go in order from deadly animals to the deadliest of all. So Lauren decided to arrange her chapters so that she goes from the sport that is easiest to play in the city to the most challenging. Writers, I think Lauren just showed us yet another way we can return to our mentor texts to improve our writing. You can be like Lauren and grab one of our class mentor texts, or find another one you like, and see if there are things that author is doing that you might want to try with your own table of contents."

You might also highlight for your writers that writers may link together different logical systems for organizing a text. So a book on tigers might first contain chapters that proceed through the tiger's day--what it does in the mornings, the days, the evenings and nights. Then the book might proceed through a discussion of the tiger's body--what its head is like, its body, its legs. (You

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Writing Curricular Calendar, Sixth Grade, 2012-2013
Unit Three - Informational Writing: Nonfiction Books

15

might even show your strongest writers that such a book could claim that the body is made to support what the tiger does in its day.)

This first bend ends as student settle upon a plan for their book and write the Table of Contents. If you ask writers to write their Table of Contents for homework, be sure to make the focus of your conferring, checking writers' plans for their overall books while writers get started drafting on one of the chapters for their books.

Bend Two -- Informational Writers are Super-Drafters: They Use All They Know While Staying Close to Their Plan-ful Vision

During this next bend, the RWP finds your most urgent work, as mentioned, is ensuring that writers have solid, logical plans for their overall texts but you will also want to get your students diving into drafting. On the first day of this work, you might help writers to see that just as an overall text has a logical organization, so does a single chapter. You might model showing that a chapter in your text on cockroaches, perhaps a chapter on natural methods to kill cockroaches, might logically start with some background information on how people are using more natural methods and why. Then you might discuss how more traditional methods are not working. And then you might show that you could discuss natural methods from least effective to most effective. So your plan might go:

1. *Why use natural methods?*
2. *Why not use natural methods--since the other methods don't work so well*
3. *Drowning (least effective)*
4. *Using homemade, humane traps*

And then you can model starting your chapter, following this quick plan, quickly jotting in front of your students:

Everywhere you go these days you see people using 'green' products, recycling, and trying to do things more naturally. When people try to do things more naturally, they are trying to do things that are good for the environment. This is true in all things, even when trying to get rid of cockroaches. Poisons and traps can be dangerous for people and pets in a home.

The RWP has found that writers will likely launch themselves into drafting with exhilaration and great energy--after all, they have been rehearsing and planning and have focused ideas for how their writing will go. Now your writers will be proceeding through cycles of planning chapters, drafting, and revising and they will all be at different parts of the process during any given day. You will want to continue to teach into raising the level of their work as they do so through minilessons, mid workshop teaching, shares, small group work and conferring. One thing you will certainly want to teach your writers is to carefully consider the "selection" of their material, a key expectation of the Common Core. You might help your writers to see that they need to

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Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Writing Curricular Calendar, Sixth Grade, 2012-2013
Unit Three - Informational Writing: Nonfiction Books

16

carefully include what information should go within each section as well as perhaps, what might be excluded. Partnerships can be a great help in this work, as partners can rehearse sections to each other, discussing what information is most relevant and powerful and what might not fit as well as how information might be organized. Partners can revise and restart chapters after these conversations, ratcheting up the level of their work constantly.

In another session, you might help them to make plans for what further information they need to gather, showing them how to make decisions about what kind of information to gather, what source to use to find it, where the information will go in their book. You might want to start a chart about purposes for different information, helping writers to see the value of including varied information. You might start with the types of information listed in the Common Core grade-specific standards: “relevant facts, definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples” and add to this list, showing students that conducting interviews or finding quotes can help make the writing feel more personal while finding facts can help the writing to feel more authoritative, for example (W 6.2). You might also make a large T-chart with “Type of Information” on one side and “How We can Use it in Our Writing” on the other. Then you might also help students see how and why to use visual features to aid to the comprehension of the reader. In doing this you will again be addressing work that the Common Core considers pivotal to sixth grade: “using formatting (e.g., headings), graphics (e.g., charts, tables), and multimedia when useful to aiding comprehension” (W 6.2). During a share or in a small group, you might teach early summarizing or paraphrasing, encouraging your writers to keep a list of the sources they have used as quoting, listing, and taking notes from sources is emphasized throughout the Common Core’s standards for middle school.

Another way the RWP has discovered to help your writers to raise the level of their drafting and revising is to remind them to make connections within and across the categories of information in their texts. The Common Core expects them to use “transitions to clarify relationships among ideas and concepts” so you might on one day, show writers how to make connections across chapters, showing them that chapters are like paper chains, with each chapter linked to the others and each part of the chapter linked to the other parts. You might show them that as they consider what information to include in a chapter and consider the logical order for including that information, they should think about finding a way to order the section so that each piece connects to what came before. So, if you were modeling about cockroaches, you might first show your writers how you remind yourself about what you want to talk about in a particular chapter on Preventing Cockroaches, perhaps listing key points (e.g. keeping home clean so cockroaches not tempted, making sure home is drafty because cockroaches don’t like that, plugging up holes, and so on) and then demonstrating finding different way to order that information. You might say, “So now, which order do I think I should mention those things so that there’s a logical way that each section goes and so that each piece connects to the piece before it? I think I’ll go with the plugging the holes thing first, because that’s something that could keep cockroaches from ever coming into your home in the first place. And then, since it’s another thing that might keep cockroaches from ever coming indoors, I can go from that into the drafty room. Oh! I like that!

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Writing Curricular Calendar, Sixth Grade, 2012-2013
Unit Three - Informational Writing: Nonfiction Books

17

My progression is like almost following the cockroach's journey into your home..."

And show them how you quickly start a chapter:

There are many ways that you can keep cockroaches from ever becoming a problem in your home.

You might then move to show writers a different logical way to start your entry, after considering what you have seen a mentor author do. You might say, "I could do what they do in *Deadly Animals*, and connect this chapter to my previous chapter about natural ways to kill cockroaches. So, instead of writing what Melissa Stewart writes, "Fish aren't the only sea creatures that can be hazardous to your health. Some ocean invertebrates can be just as deadly," to link her fish chapter to her invertebrates chapter, I'm going to write this instead:

Killing cockroaches using natural methods is not the only way to keep cockroaches out of your life. There are many ways that you can keep cockroaches from ever becoming a problem in your home. You would want to keep them from even walking in to begin with by plugging gaps. You can also make the space uncomfortable for them to be in by making it drafty. You can keep them from being able to survive by cleaning up all food and by storing foods in cockroach-proof containers.

And then show students how you connect this paragraph to the next:

Of course, no one would just open the door to a cockroach that knocks and welcome the roach to become a problem in the home. Yet many of us do just that when we leave cockroach-sized holes all over our homes. Any gap or hole that is bigger than the width of a dime is like an open door to a cockroach...

You will want students to draw from all they notice of what they see in their mentor texts so the next bend will push them specifically to study mentor texts in greater detail.

Bend Three -- Informational Writers Revise with the Goal of Setting Readers Up to Be Experts

At this point in the unit your writers have drafted many sections and chapters of text. You will want to continue to raise the level of their work as well as charge them with transferring and applying all they have learned each time they create a new section. Then too, each revision strategy and editing strategy you teach can be applied to not just a current section but to every section. In this way, your writers are continually accumulating and building on all they have learned. This is a good time to bring out the RWP *Informational Writing Continuum* and let writers consider their goals and their latest work, studying if their work shows all they have learned and that they are working toward their goals. They can use the Continuum to revise and you can involve the class in creating mentor pieces of writing which you can annotate and put up as charts for writers to utilize as they work.

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Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Writing Curricular Calendar, Sixth Grade, 2012-2013
Unit Three - Informational Writing: Nonfiction Books

18

In this bend, you will want to your writers to develop a greater repertoire of elaboration strategies. So you might begin with an inquiry lesson, one in which you charge your writers with closely studying a text independently, asking a question such as "What makes this text so effective at conveying information that I could try in my own writing?" Your writers can go off to inquire and explore and you can gather them to create a class chart of all they notice. If they do not notice ways in which a writer has elaborated on information, you will certainly want to teach into this, showing writers different moves that a mentor author makes. You might show a place in *Deadliest Animals*, for example and then demonstrate for writers how you try out what you have noticed about how the author elaborates on your own writing. So, for example, you might show writers an excerpt of your draft section on the history of cockroaches:

Cockroaches have been around for a long time. There are many different kinds of cockroaches. However there is only one species of cockroach that most people think about when they think about cockroaches - the German Cockroach. For as long as people have been around, they have been trying to get rid of them.

And then you might show writers a section from the mentor text by Stewart:

"Hippopotamuses are usually gentle giants. During the day, they lounge and snooze in shallow water holes. At night, they lumber onto land and munch on grasses and leaves.

But if a boat gets between a hippos and the deep water or between a mother and her calf, the animal will panic. It may tip over the boat and attack the passengers with its powerful jaws."

You might say, "Hmm...so I see that it's almost like she's giving a set-up sentence - "Hippopotamuses are usually gentle giants." and then follows it with information that shows exactly what she means. She does that by using imagery to share her facts in this particular section. Let me try that with my writing..." And then demonstrate revising your work:

Cockroaches have been around for a long time. When the earth was young, even before dinosaurs walked, about 350 million years ago, cockroaches were skittering across the land. (Okay. So I'm going to push myself to add one more sentence here about how long they've been here, since that feels very important.) In fact, they are the oldest living species on our planet.

You will want to teach into what your class noticed and raise the level of that work or teach into what they did not notice during their inquiry, perhaps showing them key work which the Common Core highlights. For example, you can show that informational writers use the language of experts and have your writers revise all sections to include domain-specific vocabulary terms pertinent to their topic, helping to address another key standard: "Use precise language and domain-specific vocabulary to inform about or explain the topic" (W. 6.2). You might raise the level of this work by helping writers to embed these terms rather than speckle them throughout their work. You will also want them to notice the formal, authoritative style of

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Writing Curricular Calendar, Sixth Grade, 2012-2013
Unit Three - Informational Writing: Nonfiction Books

19

the author, a style that the Common Core expects them to emulate: “Establish and maintain a formal style” (W 6.2). You can again remind your writers to include text features to contribute to understanding and you might even show them how to include multimedia features, perhaps channeling some or all of your writers to create electronic informational books. You will want to involve your writers in editing, looking carefully at where best to create paragraphs and use all they know about the conventions of grammar they have learned.

As the unit comes to a close, the RWP suggests you will want to spend time helping writers to include introductions and conclusions. You might show writers how to orient the reader to the topic and provide a preview of what is to come, highlighting the logical organization of the text. The Common Core expects a conclusion to “follow[s] from the information or explanation presented” so you might show writers how the conclusion should leave readers with big ideas over which to wonder as well as sum up what has been taught of key importance.

Informational Writers Celebrate the Hard Work They have Done in an Expert Fair

Teachers, one powerful way to celebrate the work your writers have done and to showcase all of the fascinating information your students have collected is to set up an “expert fair.” First, decide who your audience will be. It would be lovely if you could invite the class to whom you presented in the beginning of the unit so that these younger writers could see the writing process come full circle. Organize the desks into a square around the periphery of the room. Your writers can get set up on the outside of the square, sitting at desks side by side, their writing and any artifacts they would like to include set up in front of them. When visitors to the fair enter, they can move around inside the square, visiting writers’ stations. You might want to practice first, having your writers work on a short oral summary of their findings to share when visitors arrive at their station. In classrooms we have visited on the day of the expert fair, the buzz in the room is truly awe-inspiring. Your writers are sure to feel like true masters of the information they worked so hard to collect!

